

Disasters Galore

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Review of *Nostradamus: The Prophecies*, trans. Richard Sieburth (London and New York: Penguin, 2012), *London Review of Books*, 34.18 (27 September 2012): 15-16.

What is the point of prophets, and of prophecy? Not, it seems, to impart useful advance information about the future. One of the most irritating things about claims made for premonitions and other alleged forms of foresight is that they never seem to contain anything specific enough – the winner of the 4.30 at Lingfield, say, or whether it will be a white Christmas – for anyone to make practical use of them. Prophets' profit goes only to themselves. But this is to miss the point. For prophecy is not just foresight: the important thing is not the seeing, but the saying of sooth. Divining the future is a faculty, but prophesying is a speech act and almost always a public one. Prophesying is therefore institutional, in the strict sense that it tends to institute or inaugurate religions and systems of belief ('inauguration' signals its relation to practices of augury, or the divining of the future). In the message the prophet transmits his larger purpose is to be an anachronic hinge, keeping open the channel between individual human lives and the larger movements of history. The work of the prophet might in fact be seen as essentially phatic, the word coined in 1923 by Malinowski to describe 'a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words'. Indeed, 'phatic' is related to the Greek *phetes*, a 'speaker', which is the root of 'prophet', and first cousin to the Latin *vaticinor* (the Vatican is named from its site on the *collis vaticanus*, which may itself have got its name from the fact that seers and prophets used to congregate there). 'Fate' is similarly derived from *fatus*, the past participle of Latin *fari*, 'to speak'.

Prophecy is therefore performative, a speech act that does something in the world, and announces its own action as it does it. If divine prophecy is an act of speech designed to confirm faith, that faith is fundamentally in the fateful force of speaking. So the point of prophecy is not to give you tip-offs about share-price fluctuations but to be able after the event to affirm that they were foreseen. Prophecy throws out a lasso of utterances in which the predicted event is merely

the occasion or waystation that allows the speech act to be drawn back in on itself: I tell you now so that you will in future say that, back in the past that this present will be by then, I told you so. Prophecy is only ever retroactively potent, or by the kind of anticipated retrospection that we could call 'posticipation', which always means knowing too late what you might have known in advance.

This certainly seems to be the case with the man who may be regarded as the most celebrated of all European prophets, Michel de Nostradame. Perhaps the one prediction that Nostradamus, as he came to be known, makes about which there can be no argument is that 'after my earthly extinction, my writings shall fare better than during my own lifetime.' How should one read Nostradamus? The unceasing effort to decipher his verses, as if they were simply locks to be picked, has meant that they have rarely been able to be read in any way that is attentive to them as writing rather than as a cracked oracle. Up to now, the texts of his prophecies have been available to English readers only in editions whose principal purpose is to demonstrate their predictive power, often through quatrain-by-quatrain explication. Now, a vigorous, wry, alert new translation by Richard Sieburth offers English readers the experience of reading them steadily and sequentially, rather than piecemeal, and with the original French on facing pages, making it possible to read the prophecies as acts of writing rather than riddles.

Nostradamus was born in 1503 in Saint-Rémy, the son of a notary, his father's family including converted Jews of Spanish origin. He enrolled at the University of Avignon in 1519, but left the following year when it shut its doors against an outbreak of plague. For the next nine years, Nostradamus stravaiged across France and Italy, making a living as a herbalist and healer and devoting himself to the study of natural remedies. In 1529, he went to study medicine at the University of Montpellier, where Rabelais was a fellow student, but, unlike Rabelais, he never completed his studies, this time being expelled, seemingly for speaking ill of the doctors. He resumed his life as a travelling apothecary in France and Italy, eventually building up enough of a reputation to be summoned by the authorities in Aix in 1546 to treat victims of the plague. In 1547, he settled in the small Provençal town of Salon, where he would live until his death in 1566.

It was there he began his writing career, publishing the first of the annual almanacs he would produce at regular intervals for the rest of his life, followed in 1555 by a collection of recipes for jam, cosmetics and love potions, as well as a rosewater mouthwash that he guaranteed would keep the plague at bay. This, along with the evidence of the treatise he published (of which only the English translation of 1559 survives), does not suggest that he brought any unusually prescient understanding to treatment of the plague. He recommended 'hot spicis, wine & mustard' to counteract the effect of the winter cold; vomiting and the occasional opening of a vein, along with other 'thinges to make the body loose' in spring, to guard against the corruption of the blood common in that season; abstaining from 'vehement labor' and drinking cold water in the summer; and, least helpfully of all, the practice of 'much diligence' during those tricky autumn days in which 'nowe it shalbe hoat, now cold, now moyst, now drye, yea and in some daye al thies shal happen. ô quanta inclementia caeli.'

The almanacs Nostradamus had been producing since 1550 included verses embodying veiled prophecies. In 1554, he began work on the *Prophéties*, in which he aimed to set out the future history of the world in a thousand quatrains, arranged in ten 'centuries'. They appeared in three batches, in 1555, 1557 and 1558 (the third batch survives only as part of an omnibus edition of 1568). As his fame grew, he became a close friend of Queen Catherine de Médici, and it came to be believed that he had predicted in quatrain 1.35 the death of her husband Henry II in a jousting accident. His secretary later claimed that he predicted the date and place of his own death, though this was perhaps not so astonishing given that it was made the day before the event itself, when Nostradamus was almost bedridden with arthritis, dropsy and arteriosclerosis.

Prophets operate on the threshold between authority and dissidence. Religions are founded on acts of prophecy, which leads them both to venerate their own founding prophets and to fear 'false' prophets who come along later, offering to restart the clock of history from their own advent: 'count on me' here seems to mean 'count from me from now on'. Prophets embody authority, which is why they are also dangerous; they arise in times of turbulence, like the 1640s in England, or during colonial uprisings in 20th-century Africa. Nostradamus negotiated his own situation with some delicacy. Despite his growing celebrity, he

was nervous of offending religious authority, and was at pains to claim no special divine flatus and to imply no demonic connivance. Although his opening quatrain evokes a Delphic scene ('seated at night in secret study/Alone upon a stool of bronze at ease'), he insisted, in the preface he addressed to his son César in 1555, that his prophetic verses found their inspiration 'not in Dionysian frenzy, nor in the furor of madness, but in astrological considerations'. In the 16th century, astrology already stood for a form of pseudo-rationality, such as that detected by Adorno in the astrology columns of the *Los Angeles Times* in the 1950s, since it appeared to rely on calculation and interpretation rather than on any traffic with spirits, though Nostradamus also maintained cryptically that his 'intellectual understanding' needed to be supplemented by 'the voice heard at the hem by means of the slender flame'. But, where Adorno saw in modern astrology the comfort of 'a threat and a remedy in one', Nostradamus offers few such comforts or consolations.

The power of the prophet lies not just in the events he may foretell, but in the tension he introduces into the passage of time, offering scansion to what is otherwise an open and indifferent cascade of events. A prophecy that God will take revenge by fire, famine and whirlwind on the iniquities of humanity is not intended to encourage sinners to start boarding up their windows, but rather to affirm the general proposition that historical actions and consequences are bound together in a moral conversation. Although, in the preface he wrote to the final edition of the prophecies, Nostradamus attributed many of the disasters he predicts to 'the wrathful vengeance of God', his verses are almost pathologically non-committal as to causes or deserts. The cost of knowing what is to come is, for Nostradamus, that history loses all direction and coherence. There is no providential working out of a larger purpose, no steady accretion of spirit, no redemptive parabola rising from fall to forgiveness. For Nostradamus, history is just one damn thing before another, with 'None for the better & none for the worse'. The prophecies are never other than clipped and elliptical; but sometimes they are chewed down to grim stumps, which simply list the horrors in store: 'Rain, famine, war in Persia dragging on'; 'Famine, plague, war: the acres long to plough'; 'Blood, land, plague, famine, fire, mad deluge'; 'Tears, shrieks, blood: times this bitter never seen'. Most of the individuals who loom briefly into view before being hacked down, or poisoned, or incinerated, are anonymous, or generically named, as though they were cards shuffled

and dealt from some unnumberable deck: 'Bronzebeard', 'the king', 'the lady', 'the French brothers', 'the blond one', 'the forked nose'.

What's more, Nostradamus seems to take perverse delight in demonstrating repeatedly the relative futility of prediction: 'Death, then pillage: good advice, coming late':

When the eclipse of the sun takes place,
An omen in broad daylight shall be seen:
It shall be interpreted the wrong way.

The only constant seems to be the likelihood of an unexpected reversal. Nostradamus thus disturbs the regularity imposed by the steady beat of his decasyllabic quatrains by inserting into the middle of lines caesuras betokening arbitrary reversals of fortune: 'Sudden joy turning to sudden sadness ... Grief, cries, tears, blood, then exceeding gladness'. There is scarcely a quatrain in which any one state of affairs can hold out for the whole four lines:

The scourges passed, the world a smaller place:
In inhabited lands a lasting peace:
Safe passage by air, earth, river & sea:
Then the wars starting up again apace.

Only on rare occasions does any first-person expression of feeling intrude: 'I weep for Nice, Monaco, Pisa, Genoa'; or any sense of his audience – 'France, just try to remember my advice.' Given the unavoidable nature of the enormities he predicts, his prophecies are somewhat like the signs on roads running underneath cliffs that read 'Danger: Falling Rocks': just what, armed with this knowledge, are you supposed to do?

One of the most curious things about the prophecies is that they seem to draw extensively on Nostradamus's own relatively recent past. It is as though some wicked fairy had intervened to ensure that, although he would be granted knowledge of what has been and is to come, he would be unable to tell them apart. Thus past, present and future are scrambled inextricably. The notes in Sieburth's new edition provide detailed identifications of the events in France and Europe out of which Nostradamus wove his prognostications. The prophetic intimations of the future in the present mirror the irruptions of the past into the present in the many disinterments evoked in the verses.

There are uncanny resurrections throughout – ‘He who was buried shall step from the tomb’ – as well as hideous parturitions from undersea and underground of monsters with two heads, their faces facing backwards, and houses haunted by ghosts ‘dug out by dreams’.

The most insistent form of this temporal convulsion comes in the repeated references to momentous acts of disinterment that will occur in the future, most particularly of Roman remains. ‘When the mighty Roman’s tomb is dug up,/The pope elected the following day.’ The sequence loops back again to this event in quatrain 5.7, which evokes the general sense of temporal convulsion occasioned by the *Prophecies*:

The bones of the Triumvir shall be found
While seeking cryptic treasures of the dead:
No peace for those who lie in nearby ground
When they go digging for marble & lead.

Another such buckling of time through unburying occurs in quatrain 6.66:

At the founding of the sect deemed so new,
They shall dig up the great Roman’s remains:
The marble-clad tomb shall come into view:
Earthquake in April, burial in May.

Sieburth goes to great lengths in his translation to match the remarkable compression, obliquity and slanginess that characterise Nostradamus’s writing. There are striking lurches of register, like ‘gussied up in townsman’s clothes’ for ‘en habit de bourgeois’, ‘the whole army in smithereens’ for ‘forces exterminées’, or the Anglo-Saxonism of ‘Sword-clang in sky’ for ‘Bruit d’arme au ciel’, as well as such inhornisms as ‘order of catenation’ for ‘ordre conséquent’. Sometimes the oddity comes from leaving words to fend for themselves more or less untranslated: ‘Sans pied ne main’/ ‘Sans foot or hand’; ‘longue trajection’/‘the comet’s great trajection’; ‘Sol sera veu pur, rutilant & blond’/‘Sun to the eye: pure, rutilant & blond’. Yet the very fact that so much of this version can seem disconcertingly Google-generated makes it a richer, more wrangling read than any other English translator has managed or even attempted. Sieburth is particularly responsive to the sudden shifts of scale which are a feature

of Nostradamus's writing, as the cartographic view of whole territories and populations suddenly shrinks to a tiny, lyrical sliver:

Changing route at Beaune, Chalon, Dijon, Nuits,
The duke, out to thrash the Barrois estate,
Walks by the river, sees a fish tail peek
From a diving bird's beak: strait is the gate.

At times, Sieburth seems to want to roughen the texture deliberately. He explains that he has restored most of the ampersands that had been silently corrected to 'et' in Bruno Petey-Girard's 2003 edition of the first seven centuries of the *Prophéties*. But the parallel text indicates that he has also taken the opportunity to introduce ampersands where there is no sign of them in the original. There is one spasm of three of these in the space of nine verses: 'Prince de beauté tant venuste' becomes 'Prince of such great beauty & power' and 'Instant grand flamme espars sautera' is rendered as 'The flames leaping here & there suddenly'; 'Au fait Royal le comment sera sceu' becomes 'The how & why of the royal decree'. Often, the translation turns the screw on the original, making it bleaker and more sardonic, as when 'plus grand afflict' becomes 'disasters galore', or 'Ce qui sera jamais ne feut si beau' 'Never so fair was that which shall never be,' though it is presumably susceptible of the more optimistic reading, 'That which will be was never so fair.' In keeping faith with the strangeness of these verses Sieburth has succeeded brilliantly in making them at last readable, in all their weird, cruel beauty, their jagged brilliance and spasmodic dash. It is unlikely that Nostradamus the prophet will ever be completely replaced by Nostradamus the poet, though this translation may do much to encourage more readings like that of Anna Carlstedt, who in *La Poésie oraculaire de Nostradamus* (2005), attempts this very thing.

In his historical introduction, Stéphane Gerson suggests that Nostradamus offers a useful guide to living with life's vicissitudes: 'Valleys follow peaks, he said. Pleasure and joy are intermingled with sorrow. But moderation and perseverance outline a sound path forward.' Sieburth offers a much bleaker view in his translator's introduction: 'History, a nightmare from which the prophet is trying to awake, offers itself as a single, unremitting trauma.' Though one explication of Nostradamus in 1681 is entitled *Good and Joyful News for England*, few have been able to find reason for sustained optimism in

his prophecies, and even the good news offered in 1681 was the distinctly wonky assurance, as it turned out, ‘that Charles the II. of Great Britain, France and Ireland King, Defender of the faith, &c. shall have a son of his own body lawfully begotten, that shall succeed him in the imperial throne of Great Britain, and all other his dominions; and reign long after his father, most fortunately and well beloved’. It’s true that if anyone does come out well from the maelstrom of gore and fiasco, it could be England, for whom the very last quatrain predicts a grand empire that will last three hundred years (‘to the great discomfort of the Portuguese’). That this is the hundredth verse of the tenth century of verses should not count for much, given the changeability that frets away at every resting point. Unsurprisingly, Nostradamus has often been taken up by millenarians, since one of the constants in human history, it seems, is the unquenchable consolation that humans take from the prospect of their wholesale annihilation. Yet here too Nostradamus proves refractory to the fixating work of fantasy, for devastations prove to be as impermanent as prosperity. All we can be sure of, so his verses tersely, tonelessly insist, is that, in Ovid’s words, *omnia mutantur, nihil interit* – everything changes, nothing perishes.

As one might expect, and as Gerson’s useful appendix on the five-hundred year history of responses to Nostradamus shows, his predictions have always seemed to have particular authority in times of turbulence and uncertainty. The statement in quatrain 9.49 that ‘The senate of London its king shall slay ... Thus throwing the realm into disarray’ was read by Royalists as a judgment on the execution of Charles I, while the details of Louis XVI’s unsuccessful attempt to flee Paris in 1791 were thought to be set out in cryptic detail in quatrain 9.20. Admirers and opponents of Napoleon sieved the quatrains for adumbrations of his glory and downfall respectively, and Hitler was said by American newspapers to have been rattled by quatrain 2.24, which foretold that ‘most of the host shall move against Hister’ and that he would end up as ‘the great one dragged in iron cage’, though this didn’t prevent the Luftwaffe preparing for the invasion of France by dropping thousands of leaflets announcing the imminence of the Thousand-Year Reich as it seems to be predicted in 5.94: ‘He shall shift towards greater Germania/ Brabant & Flanders, Ghent, Bruges, Boulogne.’ The fact that Nostradamus seems so preoccupied by invasions from the East has enabled recent proponents of the ‘clash of civilisations’ to gourmandise on his omens and portents.

The epistemological problem is not the difficulty of interpreting Nostradamus, but the fact that his obliquity makes his work so generally applicable, since an anticipation of everything is an anticipation of nothing in particular. Perhaps, in some perverse way, we don't look to Nostradamus to make sense of history, but rather call on history, carefully domesticated in terms of great men, epochal conflicts and irrevocable turning-points, to defend against the ferment of agony and absurdity vouchsafed in the vision of Michel de Nostradame.